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# Alchemical transformations in soul and psyche

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Personal and societal transformation is channelled directly through the body of the artist in the ritualistic works of Bert Gilbert.

Gilbert's interdisciplinary works include performance, costume, photography, fetishistic objects and 2D works. Not afraid to broach sexuality and obsession, she has gained a reputation for pushing the audience to confront underlying desires and taboo.

*Bert is London's mistress of bucking trends and blushing cheeks.*

- Clare Considine, *Le Cool*

There are allusions to Jungian analytical psychology perhaps most obviously in the works *Shadows of my Former Self* and *Animus*, and to alchemy and symbolism throughout the artist's practice.

*Her process is one of re-discovering a universal 'Sacred Heritage', the foundation of primordial cosmologies (Mircea Eliade: Rites and Symbols of Initiation) witnessed within myth, nature rituals, folkloric storytelling and music.* - Bert Gilbert website

The attitude, frankness and originality of the artist makes her a

highly potent force and this is sadly a quality which is often lacking in an increasingly po-faced art world.

Her performances can be seen as essential interventions, calling for malleability in a congealing culture.

## How do you define the body?

I see the body as visceral and multilayered: emotional, spiritual, physical, sexual, sacred and profane. A portal/juncture to the past the present and the future.

A house of memories, a record of time, punctuated and scarred by the experiences, the interruptions, the rites of passage we experience through pleasure and pain. The human body as the microcosm of the Earth and the Earth as the macrocosm of the human body.

My practice explores the internal externalised and vice versa; the relationship between the body and the mind, dislocating and reconstituting parts of the body and using these fragments as a vehicle to form a visual language. My particular fetish is the skin, and I explore this in multiple ways within my practice: *The Fourskins of the Apocalypse* (2016) are alchemical second-skinsuits for "ritual sacrifice and

religious raves". The Necro-suit is based on Aztec priests that used to flay their sacrificial victims and wear the skin until it flaked off.

The Maenad-Medusa, a hybrid of Dionysus's female followers (often referred to as "the raving ones") who, high on a mixture of wine and weed, used to run on a full moon into the forest and rip the skin of anyone that they came into contact with, man or beast.

The challenges are to make work that, although rooted in a personal expression, acts as a meeting point for others to experience a physical representation of the intangible concept of spirit/collective consciousness. The rediscovering of what Mircea Eliade calls a universal 'sacred heritage', the foundation of primordial cosmologies witnessed within myth, nature rituals, folkloric storytelling and music.

## In what way do you feel you've pushed your conception and application of the body?

My work is physically enduring, time-consuming and ritualised, transferring the energy of the making into the final pieces. Previously, I have kept this behind the scenes; more

Bert Gilbert, Maenad  
Medusa Skinsuit









recently I have started to document this process.

I am now making much larger works (totems/entry poles) in new materials, experimenting with using my body as a performative tool within the work. This is an uncomfortable transition but is yielding interesting results.

By using myself as a channel for communication, removing the self-consciousness of my constructed persona and exploring the liberation within, this makes the body a vehicle for expression of archetypal representations of the collective unconscious.

### **What potential do you see in bodies?**

I'm not sure I see any more potential than other artists; all I can do is continue to explore the themes and narratives that inspire me and communicate them in the lexicon of symbols that I am constructing. These representations are unique for me: there is transcendence in the repetition of themes and the body gives unlimited potential for this. It is the vessel that carries life and spirit. The existential search for meaning that is trapped inside the visceral and multiple layers that make up a human body. The alchemist's views on this are the basis of this interest; the connection to the Earth/cosmos "as above so below".

The beauty in the potential for change, for mutation, for transition into beings undetermined by gender or sexual persuasion.

### **Are you conscious of your own body in the same way as in your work?**

As someone who identifies as a



Photographer Wig Worland © 2018. Image Courtesy of artist.

female, I am conscious of my body in the usual ways that our culture has undermined the power of females via achieving a form of unattainable perfection and dismissal/shaming that results in displaying “un-feminine” traits.

As an artist I am exploring the dark feminine and the blurring of gender until it is out of focus—for me, there is a magic that happens in this peripheral vision. I am conscious also of being both male and female at the same time and how that relates to my construction of self and the wider cultural ideas of sexuality and gender construction.

The ruptures between the interior and the exterior, the epidermic meeting points of emotional and physical spiritual interventions. The filters between what is seen and unseen. The genderless *Liberation Suits* (2017) made in collaboration with Izzet Ers were an exploration into this. They were based in wordplay, the subtext of what is said and what is actually meant. Through the resulting union of our partnership (the Jungian concept of *syzygy*) we created seven bodies in the form of boiler suits using alchemical symbols and colours.

Using myself as a vessel, I am investigating the kinetic aesthetic that my actions can create, and the subsequent handling and shaping of the material which leaves the essence of my actions subliminally embedded in the work.

### **What do you see as the greatest challenge to the body?**

To bring back humour, hope and connection in this “age of loneliness”

(George Monbiot). To create emotionally based shared experience that transcends us from a world constructed entirely on capitalist principles of consumerism and a dysmorphic perception of ‘body beautiful’, grounding us back to the earth.

### **Why and when did you choose the body as a medium for your work?**

Perhaps not a conscious choice, but a natural one, being that I live in a body and it’s the house that I view and process the world in.

Since an early age I was fascinated with surgery and wounds and skeletons, the beauty of the grotesque. I also had multiple illnesses and injuries so on a personal level the body literally became a site for both physical and mental pain.

I was taught to stitch at an early age and I think that making stuffed limbs and embroidering body parts became a natural transition from using these tools to express myself, stitching myself back together and for an understanding of self.

There is literal and metaphorical use of the body in my practice: the material sensuality of the objects produced, the constant repetition specifically of fingers, eyes and multilayered skins, the mark-making and the use of materials such as hair, bone, fur and my own blood (*Baptism by fire remains*, 2013). They signify as rites of passage of death and rebirth.

### **Whose work regarding the physical human body do you admire?**

I loved Francis Bacon since an art teacher introduced me to him at 11. The violence and energy he captures

within his paintings, multiple versions of Dorian Gray’s rotting portraits exposed from the attic.

Austrian-Viennese actionist Hermann Nitsch staged intense ritual productions under the title *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater* in which urine, faeces, and blood were slathered over bodies of the performers. He was one of the formative artists that I became obsessed with, all the blood a grotesque orgy of bodies and animal carcasses.

The French artist Orlan gave a series of lectures when I was at St Martin’s that had a marked effect on me, her series of projects to have her face and body surgically altered to resemble Botticelli’s *Venus* in a bid to draw attention to the double standards and pressure surrounding perceptions of female beauty.

Tim Hawkinson’s collaged body parts from 2007 and his multiple hands from 2004.

Cindy Sherman’s constant reinvention of self and use of her own body.

Marina Abramović in the way she opens and holds a space for people to explore healing through her own physical endurance.

Arnulf Rainer’s intense physical expressions of emotion, the use of his feet and fingers, photographing himself in states of extreme emotion and testing the effects of hallucinogenic drugs on his practice.

Franko B’s bloodletting performances [on his] own body made his experience more relatable to his audience, because they could imagine the pain being inflicted as if it was their own.

Louise Bourgeois... really no words needed.

Rebecca Horn's fantastic extensions of the body.

Other feminist artists such as Hannah Wilke, who presents her own nude body as an object for visual interest, allowing her to claim her body and her sexuality as her own.

Antony Micallef's portraits are particularly awesome.

James Merry's headpieces for Björk are breathtaking.

### **Describe your technique?**

There are multiple techniques that I use in the creation of work. It is heavily based in psychoanalytical energetic responses from in-depth research and repeated themes; wordplay which then culminates in a series of multimedia expressions: installation wardrobe, artefact, assemblage, moving image.

More recently I have been collaborating on a series of projects with Izzet Ers, which has helped with losing the ego and ownership of work. The work produced becomes neither mine nor his and the space for play and production that happens between is a vessel of communication. It became a shorthand that is easier somehow than my normal practice which is still in longhand (as it can take me years to finish a series or piece of work). Giving ego and ownership over in a partnership speeds up this process both on production but on a decision-making process. When you solely generate work, it takes much more time.

### **Where do you find inspiration?**

Although clichéd, everywhere can

function as a source of inspiration but specifically for the past 10 years I've studied psychoactive plants/ethnobotany (of which a lot of my work has been inspired by, without actually imbibing them), the mystery schools, shamanism, chaos magic, psychoanalytical texts, philosophy, anthropology, alchemical and medical texts. Museums and shows.

The diseased body, the heroic body, the queer body, the abject body, the body as machine.

### **Do you see the body as a place of permanence or change?**

For me it's change; you can shed a skin and begin again. *My Fourskins of the Apocalypse* are archetypal second-skinsuits for rites of passage that are intended to transmogrify you from one state to another. Impermanence and change is all we have.

### **If you could change one thing about how humans are constructed what would it be?**

The addition of an actual third eye, or eyes in the back of your head, the ability to regenerate limbs like salamanders and grow more arms and hands—many hands make light work/Goddess Durga personified—and a literal third leg would be great as well!

### **With developments like VR changing the way we view our bodies, will this affect your work?**

Yes of course, as my work will always be some reflection of the time it is made in; even if my practice isn't directly based in these ideas, it will still be influenced by them. Whilst





thinking on this, I remembered the work of Arthur Elsenaar and Eric Kluitenberg (1994). They stated:

*The technologisation of the human body implies a conceptual abstraction that destroys the integrity of the physical experience. Destroying the duality between the physical and the spiritual, it also undermines the traditional opposition of culture and nature. Our cultural customs, our habits, our behaviour all become mechanisms to be altered at will in order to make the world-machine run smoothly. It raises an anxious uncertainty about the question: what does it mean to be human?*

Furthering this inquiry, if virtual worlds can appear as real as reality and if this reality is also a construct, then perhaps it will lead to the exploration of the absent body—or, as Stelarc stated, “the obsolete body” that man has created technological and informational environments which the body alone cannot hope to handle. The body and machine are merged, a hybrid.

There is also an interesting discussion happening around wellbeing at the juncture between our own bodies, the bodies of others,

healthcare spaces and medical technologies. The artist Ilona Sagar in *Correspondence O* (2017) “explores the link between language, surface, technologies and the body” through “mediated encounters in social, political and experiential space. Illusion and material.”

I am currently looking to work in augmented or virtual reality, to develop my *Portable Portals* (2017) into a series of installations that operate in both planes; a psychoactive multi-sensory experience triggered by objects in the installations.

On a lighter note, I would love to explore the technology that can grow organs in vats; I have always been obsessed with medical oddities in jars and produced a whole series of objects and illustrations inspired by this (*I Put It in Cider*, 2005-7). The Hunterian Museum has always been a favourite place to visit when I need cheering up. I was also a medical illustrator for a year or so at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, which was a great experience to fuel my medical obsession, although I did have to draw the five stages of sexual excitement in male and female repeatedly for this time... which was eye-opening.

